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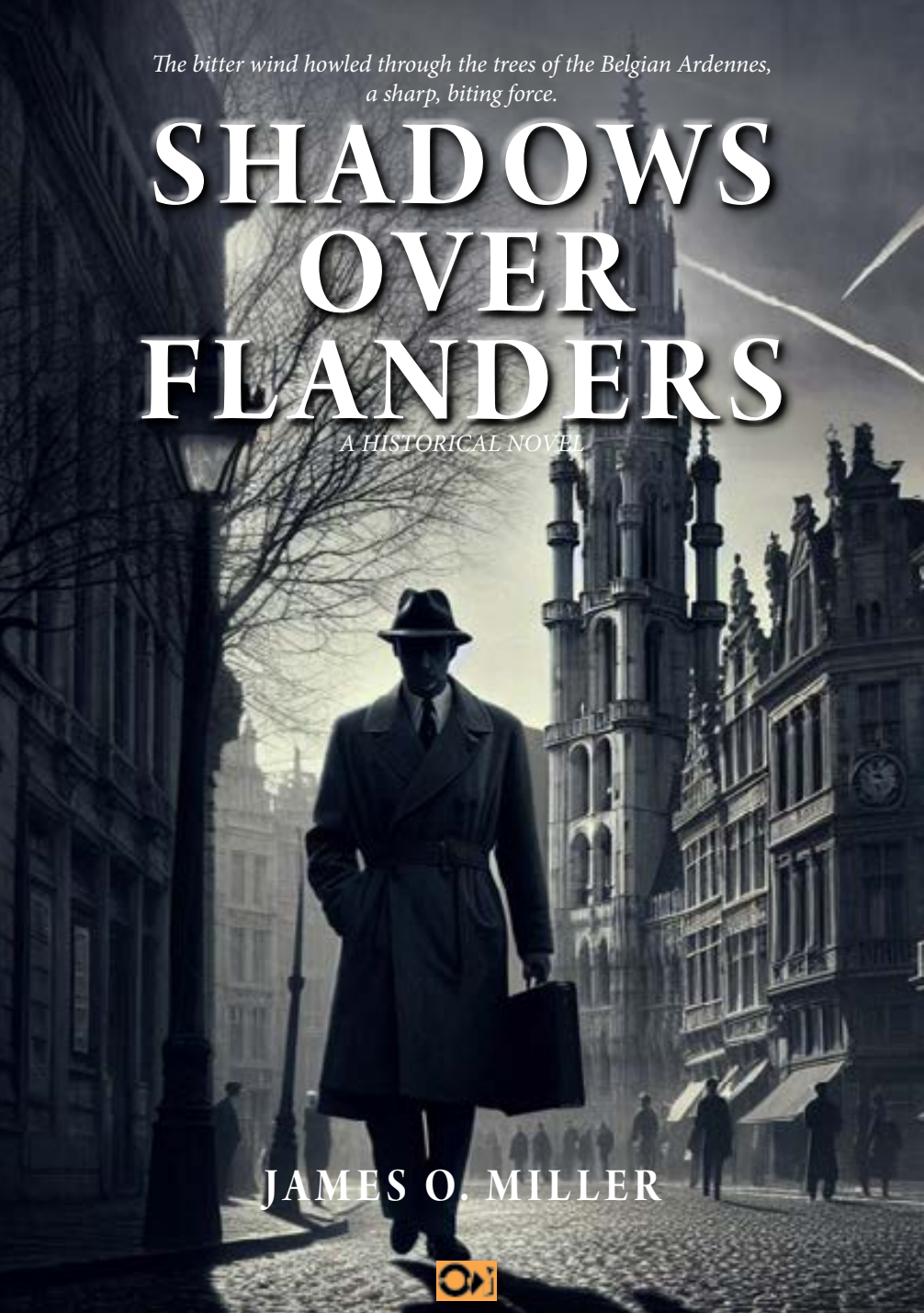
SHADOWS OVER FLANDERS

A HISTORICAL NOVEL



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James O. Miller

Shadows over Flanders

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The bitter wind howled through the trees of the Belgian Ardennes, a sharp, biting force that clawed at Captain Thomas Hunter's face. He hunched lower, the cold cutting through the seams of his uniform. The forest around him was a tangled mass of shadow and frost, the kind of place where silence was an enemy, and every crack of a branch, every rustle of leaves, could mean a bullet in the back. His breath came in short, controlled bursts, misting in the frozen air. His eyes flicked nervously to the sky, half moon, the kind that lit up the night with a chill silver glow, making every shape in the darkness seem more dangerous than it really was.

Hunter checked his watch, his fingers stiff from the cold, the clicking of the second hand louder than it should have been in the stillness. Time was running out.

"Get in, get out, destroy the tunnel, no heroes," his commanding officer had told him. Simple. Precise.

What they hadn't mentioned was the German presence, how many patrols were out, how many sentries, or what kind of hell Hunter was about to walk into.

The mission had been clear from the start: infiltrate German lines, find the hidden railway tunnel beneath the forest, and destroy it. A high-stakes sabotage operation deep behind enemy lines. The Allies needed the tunnel wiped out, its supply line severed before the Germans could use it to launch their upcoming offensive. Intelligence had pinpointed the tunnel's location, but it had also confirmed one thing: the Germans had dug in deep.

Hunter cursed under his breath, his hand brushing over the strap of his Thompson submachine gun. The silencer was in place, snug and secure. He adjusted his gloves, fingers rigid with the cold, then crawled forward, moving with the precision of a man who had spent a decade in the shadows.

Every sound seemed amplified in the still night, his boots crunching softly over frozen leaves, the distant hum of a German truck on a nearby road, the rustling of branches as the wind cut through the trees. He had

been dropped off behind enemy lines two days ago, armed with only a few supplies and the conviction that he was one of the last men who could prevent a disaster. The tunnel had to be destroyed, no matter the cost.

Hunter's eyes scanned the woods ahead, the landscape bathed in shadow and moonlight, every movement suspect. His heart pounded with a familiar rhythm, but his mind stayed calm—focused. If there was one thing he had learned from years of operations like this, it was that panic could kill you quicker than any bullet.

The low rumble of the German patrol truck grew louder as it drew nearer. The sound of an engine, muffled by the trees, but unmistakable. If Hunter wasn't careful, the truck would pass within a few hundred yards of his position. His hand rested on the trigger, but he didn't move. Not yet.

He could hear the voices of the soldiers inside, the dull conversation in a language he had grown used to over the years. They were close. Too close.

"Where are the patrols tonight?" a voice called out, gruff and bored.

"Just another quiet night. How many more days until the big push?" came the reply, lower and more serious.

The second man's voice dropped even further. "Could be any time now. Intelligence suggests the Allies will strike soon. We've got our orders. Get ready."

Hunter's eyes narrowed. This wasn't just any patrol. The Germans were waiting for something. A message. An attack. The tension in the air was thick enough to cut with a knife.

The truck rumbled past, and Hunter exhaled slowly, feeling the tension in his chest ease just a fraction. But that feeling was fleeting, he couldn't afford to relax. Not yet.

He moved, ghosting through the forest like a wraith, his senses on high alert. The tunnel was somewhere ahead. Somewhere beneath this forest. He didn't know exactly where. But he would find it. He had to.

A flash of movement caught his attention, and he froze. A German sentry, alone, walking down a narrow path through the trees, his rifle slung casually over his shoulder. Hunter's mind raced, calculating the odds. He could take the soldier out silently, no

problem, but the risk of making noise, of alerting others was too great.

Hunter's fingers tightened around the grip of his Thompson. One shot, and it was over. But there were more patrols out there. More guards. One mistake, and the whole mission would be compromised.

"Think, Hunter," he muttered under his breath. His eyes darted around the dense forest, his mind working at lightning speed. The sentry wasn't looking in his direction. There was cover, a small outcrop of rocks just to his right. If he could move fast enough…

He took a deep breath, forcing his body to relax, and in one swift motion, he darted for the rocks. The sentry had heard nothing, still lost in his own world.

Hunter's heart thudded in his chest, but his movements were smooth, practiced. His hand was already on the knife before he even reached the soldier.

The German turned at the wrong moment. Hunter slammed the soldier into the rocks, a hand over his mouth, knife pressed against his throat. The man struggled for a moment but quickly went still as Hunter's cold eyes met his.

"Not a sound," Hunter whispered, his voice low,

deadly. He could hear the German's panicked breathing as he nodded quickly. The soldier's face was pale, sweat beading on his brow.

Hunter didn't hesitate. A quick, clean cut. The soldier collapsed, his body falling silently to the ground.

He wiped the knife clean on the soldier's jacket, then stood over the lifeless form, taking a moment to listen. The night was quiet once more, but Hunter could feel the weight of time pressing on him.

The tunnel was waiting.

He moved again, more swiftly now. The mission was almost in reach. But the Germans were on alert. The closer he got to the tunnel, the more dangerous things would become. Hunter's mind raced through the possibilities as he neared the edge of the forest.

The sound of another engine. Louder this time.

Hunter's eyes narrowed. The truck was coming back. And it was moving fast.

I.

The wire fence loomed ahead like a jagged line of steel teeth, its coils glittering in the pale moonlight. Beyond it, the German camp hummed with the uneasy energy of a well-defended fortress, guards shouted orders in guttural German, the unmistakable clink of metal on metal as weapons were sharpened, and the low rumble of engines hinted at the movements of trucks and patrols just beyond the shadows. It was a fortress of steel and discipline, and Captain Thomas Hunter had no business being here.

His fingers tightened around the small combat knife at his belt, the blade reassuringly cold against his skin. Patience was the key now. The plan had been simple: slip through the lines, find the tunnel, destroy it, and get out. But nothing in war was ever as simple as it seemed. Every move had to be calculated, every moment measured.

He flattened himself against the cold, wet earth of the Belgian forest floor, his eyes locked on the sentries patrolling the camp's perimeter. The guards were methodical, their movements sharp and deliberate. He'd been watching them for an hour now, tracking their routes, timing their movements. But this was the moment that would make or break the mission.

Hunter's breath fogged in the air, his chest rising and falling in slow, measured breaths. He could feel the cold creeping through his uniform, but it didn't matter. The fear? It was buried deep, hidden behind years of training. What mattered now was the tunnel. If he failed to destroy it, the Germans would have the upper hand in the coming days, and a massive offensive would be launched, one that could tip the balance of the war.

The guard nearest him turned away, his flashlight flickering against the dark landscape. A sharp breath escaped Hunter's lips, barely audible above the wind rustling through the trees. This was it.

He pushed himself to his feet, moving in a low crouch, staying in the shadow of the trees. His heart hammered in his chest, but he kept his pace steady, each step calculated. One wrong move, one noise too loud, and the entire camp would be on alert. The air

seemed to thicken with the weight of his steps as he neared the wire fence, every movement a calculated risk.

The guard was coming back. His boots crunched on the gravel, and Hunter's pulse quickened. A few more yards to the gap in the fence. He could see it now, the weak point in the perimeter. It was his only chance.

"Steady," he muttered to himself, the words barely escaping his lips.

He moved, gliding from one shadow to the next, a ghost in the night. The moonlight caught on his rifle, strapped tightly to his back, but he ignored it. It was the knife he needed now, the silence of the blade, and the precision of his strike.

As he reached the gap in the fence, his hands fumbled slightly with the wire cutters, the cold making his fingers clumsy. He had only one shot at this. The snap of metal sounded far too loud in the night air, the sound of it tearing through the wire like a gunshot in the silence. His stomach clenched, but he didn't hesitate.

Suddenly, a figure appeared out of nowhere, a Ger-

man soldier just a few feet away, emerging from the shadows. The soldier's flashlight danced across the gap, right where Hunter was crouched. Time seemed to stretch out, but there was no time to think. Only react.

Hunter's instincts kicked in with the precision of years of covert operations. He leapt forward, hands flying to grab the soldier by the throat before he could even raise an alarm. The man's eyes went wide with shock as Hunter yanked him into the darkness, dragging him behind a thick patch of undergrowth.

Hunter pressed the sharp edge of his knife to the soldier's throat, feeling the cold steel against his skin, his heart hammering in his chest. The soldier's breath was rapid, his pulse throbbing beneath Hunter's grip.

"Quiet," Hunter whispered in perfect German, his voice cold, almost detached.

The soldier's wide eyes flicked from the knife to Hunter's face, then back to the blade. The man's breath came in gasps, his voice lost in his throat as he nodded weakly. Blood began to pool beneath him, darkening the ground beneath their feet. Hunter didn't wait for the body to go limp. With one swift motion, he dragged the man deeper into the under-

growth, out of sight, before his own hand slipped the knife clean from the soldier's throat.

He wiped the blade quickly on the man's uniform, then tucked it back into his belt, moving like a shadow. There was no time to think about the life he'd just taken. No time to mourn the man who had only been doing his duty, just like Hunter. The mission came first.

The soldier's body lay forgotten, hidden by the darkness. Hunter straightened, and for a moment, he allowed himself to breathe, just a fraction of a second to calm his nerves. But only a fraction. He wasn't done yet.

The German camp was still buzzing with activity, oblivious to the shadow that had slipped through its defences. Hunter's movements were swift and sure as he closed the distance between himself and the heart of the camp. He had no illusions about the danger. The Germans were alert now, perhaps more than ever. He had to move fast.

Ahead, the structures of the camp began to come into focus, small huts, tents, and makeshift shelters scattered among the trees. He ducked low, blending into the shadows, keeping his steps light and his

breathing steady. The sounds of the camp, of soldiers shouting orders, of engines roaring to life, grew louder as he neared.

His eyes darted to the right. A small supply depot sat near the edge of the camp, and beside it, an armed guard leaned lazily against a barrel, his rifle slung across his chest. Hunter could feel the heat rising in his chest. One guard. One chance.

He didn't hesitate.

Hunter darted forward, moving fast, just a blur in the night. The guard never saw him coming. With one swift motion, Hunter was on him, dragging him into the shadows before the man could even raise an alarm. A sharp twist of his wrist disarmed the soldier, sending the rifle clattering to the ground.

The guard's eyes went wide with panic, his mouth opening to shout. But Hunter was faster. A sharp punch to the throat, then a well-placed knee to the stomach silenced him.

"Stay down," Hunter growled in German, the words barely above a whisper. "You won't survive another breath if you scream."

The soldier's eyes, wide with fear, locked onto

Hunter's, and he nodded. The captain didn't wait. He grabbed the man's rifle, slinging it over his shoulder, and moved on, more determined than ever. He was close. He could feel it in his bones.

The tunnel was within reach. And this time, nothing—not the guards, not the patrols, not even the entire German army, was going to stop him.

The night was still young, but Hunter knew this would be the longest few hours of his life.

II.

The moon hung high, casting an ethereal glow over the Belgian countryside. Hunter crouched behind the jagged rock formation, his senses sharp as a blade, every nerve tingling with the anticipation of the task ahead. The tunnel was less than a hundred yards away, a dark mouth nestled in the earth, but every inch was heavily guarded. His eyes narrowed as he listened to the rumble of German trucks in the distance, the tires hissing against the wet road. The sound carried far in the crisp night air, and for a moment, it was the only noise in the world.

A sigh escaped his lips, not from fear, but from the weight of the responsibility pressing down on him. This tunnel wasn't just a link for supplies, it was a key node in the Germans' ability to launch their next major offensive. The Allies had to sever that link, no matter the cost. But Hunter knew the stakes went

deeper than what he had been briefed. If this mission went wrong, if the Germans reinforced their supply lines before the next push, the Allies could be looking at a disaster. This wasn't just sabotage; this was the difference between victory and defeat.

The German sentry at the entrance to the tunnel was oblivious, pacing back and forth in the cold night air. A tall, wiry man with the sort of relaxed demeanour that only someone who thought they were safe could have. His rifle hung loosely across his shoulder as he hummed a tuneless song to himself, eyes occasionally drifting upward toward the sky as if he had all the time in the world. The arrogance of it made Hunter's blood boil.

The trucks rumbled closer, their engines growing louder, a constant reminder of the forces Hunter was up against. His hand tightened around the grenade strapped to his belt. One slip, one moment of hesitation, and everything would fall apart.

Hunter crouched lower, his muscles coiled like a spring. His breath was shallow, steady. He glanced to his left, his dark eyes scanning the area. No movement. No sign of another guard. The coast was as clear as it was going to get.

He didn't hesitate. The world narrowed, the space between him and the sentry shrinking in the blink of an eye. The rocks crunched beneath his boots as he sprinted forward, silent as a shadow, staying low to the ground. The sentry's back was to him, oblivious to the danger closing in. The seconds ticked by in Hunter's mind like hours, and then, *the guard turned.*

Hunter didn't wait. His instincts were like a finely honed edge as he leapt forward, a blur of motion, his body colliding with the German guard's in a controlled explosion of force. The sentry grunted, trying to raise his rifle, but Hunter was faster. His silenced pistol was already in his hand, the barrel pressed against the soldier's temple. A muffled shot rang out, swallowed by the dense forest, and the guard's body went limp in his arms.

"Quick and clean," Hunter muttered to himself, hauling the soldier's body into the shadowed underbrush. He dragged the body deeper into the dark, just out of sight of the tunnel entrance. It was a momentary pause, a necessary precaution. No one would notice the dead man, not yet. Not unless they came looking.

Hunter turned his attention to the tunnel entrance. The iron doors stood like an ominous threshold,

half-buried under a tangle of dirt and debris. The lock was heavy, but nothing a trained man couldn't handle. He moved to it swiftly, methodical, his hands steady as he worked the tools from his belt. His mind was already ahead, visualizing the explosion that would seal this place forever.

His heart beat steady, but every second felt like an eternity. The fuse was short, only three minutes before the charges detonated. He had no time to waste.

With a satisfying click, the lock fell open. He eased the doors apart just wide enough to slip through, scanning the interior with a quick glance. The tunnel was long, dark, and reeked of damp earth. The faint echo of the rumbling trucks still reached his ears, but inside, the silence was suffocating.

The smell of gasoline and oil hit his nostrils, mingled with the sharper scent of metal and sweat. Rows of wooden crates lined the walls, stamped with the unmistakable insignia of the German military. Hunter's eyes flicked over the labels, his mind noting the supplies, ammunition, medical kits, explosives. This was more than just a transit point. This was a strategic hub.

He moved quickly through the narrow corridor,

glancing over his shoulder every few steps, ensuring the coast remained clear. The tunnel stretched on farther than he'd anticipated, but there was no time for hesitation. He found the detonators fast enough, a bundle of wires, a battery pack, and a long fuse attached to the main supply crates. A standard setup, nothing elaborate, but enough to do the job.

He set the charges with surgical precision, wiring them up to the crates. His fingers worked quickly, methodically, a lifetime of training guiding every motion. He could feel the sweat starting to gather beneath his uniform, the tension in his muscles as the seconds ticked away.

"Two minutes," he muttered to himself. "Focus, Hunter."

Hunter paused for a moment, eyes narrowing as he listened for any sign of movement outside the tunnel. Nothing. The trucks had passed. The sentry was still out of sight. He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction, everything was falling into place.

He checked his watch again. *One minute.*

The detonators were set, the charges ready. He was as prepared as he could be. But there was always the

chance of something going wrong. That was the nature of war. He couldn't let the fear get to him.

Hunter exhaled, the sharp cold air stinging his lungs. He set his pistol to the side, reaching for the grenade at his belt. A simple piece of equipment, but one that had saved his life more times than he could count. He pulled the pin, dropping the grenade at the foot of the supplies and sprinting back toward the tunnel entrance, ducking low to avoid any potential surveillance from outside.

"Thirty seconds," he murmured. He could already feel the pressure building in his chest as the fuse began its countdown.

As he reached the tunnel entrance, he flattened himself against the wall, breathing shallowly, eyes darting around for any sign of life. The explosion would be heard across the entire area, but there was no turning back now. It had to be done.

He could feel it—the vibration of the ground beneath him, the slight shift in the air as the fuse wound down to its final seconds.

"Five... Four... Three..." He counted silently in his head. The air grew thicker. The tension unbearable.

The ground trembled beneath his boots, and then ...*BOOM!*

The earth seemed to shake beneath him as the tunnel erupted in a flash of light and deafening sound. The explosion swallowed everything, the tunnel, the supplies, the lives of men who had worked tirelessly to keep it running. And as the smoke cleared, the mission was complete.

Hunter's ears rang with the aftermath, but his heart pounded with satisfaction. The destruction was total. The tunnel was gone. The Germans would never use it again.

But as he turned to retreat, his mind couldn't help but drift to one thing.

III.

The tunnel had fallen silent, save for the distant rumble of the trucks moving along the road and the occasional rustle of wind in the trees. Hunter's fingers were steady as he completed the final adjustment on the explosive charge, locking it into place with a sharp click. The satisfaction of a job well done pulsed in his veins, but that feeling was short-lived.

As soon as the last click echoed in the cold air, a noise cut through the stillness.

Footsteps.

Heavy, deliberate, and unmistakable. Not one pair, but several. His pulse skipped, and his body went taut as a bowstring. His heart slammed against his chest, but his mind moved with the efficiency of someone who'd been trained for this very moment. Every movement, every decision was life and death.

He didn't hesitate. Dropping to the ground, he rolled into the shadowed crevice between the rocks. His breath came in shallow bursts as he stayed perfectly still, waiting for the inevitable approach. There was no more time to finish what he'd started. He had to wait, pray, and hold his position. His eyes darted between the charges, ticking down on the timer.

The German patrol emerged from the trees, the faint glow of their lanterns flickering in the dark. At the front, a bulky officer led the group. His face was scarred from some past battle, the lines of his features sharp with suspicion. The others followed close behind, their boots crunching softly on the underbrush, and their voices carried in the chill night air.

"I thought I heard something," the officer said, his voice thick with the accent of someone who'd lived in these woods for too long.

Hunter's breath hitched, but he didn't move. Not an inch. His eyes remained fixed on the officer, his body pressed into the dirt, heart hammering in his ears.

"Couldn't have been," another soldier replied. "The wind plays tricks in these woods, sir."

But the officer wasn't satisfied. He stopped, his eyes scanning the darkness like a hawk searching for prey. His gaze was sharp, calculating, and for a moment, Hunter was certain that his cover was blown.

The officer took a step forward, and then another, closing the gap. Hunter's mind raced, the seconds slipping by like sand through an hourglass. If he was found now, it was all over. Not just the mission, but the lives of everyone depending on him, his allies, his comrades, would be lost.

The officer took another step forward. The soldier behind him hesitated, as if to say something, but the officer waved him off. His eyes narrowed, scanning the shadows once more. Hunter's stomach churned with the tension of it all.

His fingers instinctively tightened around the grip of his pistol, the cold metal a silent reminder of the danger he was in. One shot, just one and it would all be over. But the risk was too high. If he fired and missed, the entire patrol would descend on him, and the mission would fail before he could even leave the tunnel.

The officer stepped again, now within arm's reach of Hunter's position.

His breath came slow and shallow, the adrenaline pumping through his veins. His eyes were locked on the officer, who was now less than five feet away, scanning the ground with a critical eye. The sound of his boots on the forest floor, the soft rustle of his coat, the unmistakable smell of stale tobacco all mixed together, creating a suffocating tension.

Hunter's eyes flicked to the explosives, ten seconds. His mind raced. The officer's next move could decide everything. If he stepped any closer, he would see the wires, the set charges. He would know. It would be the end of it all.

The officer's gaze seemed to settle on the rocks ahead of him, his brow furrowing as he looked past Hunter's position. Time slowed as his hand hovered near the side of his rifle, a move so small it could easily go unnoticed, but one that sent a cold shiver down Hunter's spine.

A second passed. Two.

Then, just as the officer took that final step, the ground beneath them seemed to shudder with the force of something far larger than their small patrol. The rumble of trucks grew louder, the sound of war drawing nearer.

"Sir, it's nothing," one of the soldiers muttered, sensing the shift in the officer's focus. The sudden arrival of a far-off military vehicle sounded like the cavalry, a small salvation for Hunter in that moment.

The officer turned sharply. "Hmph, it better be nothing. Stay alert."

The patrol began to move again, following their leader's direction away from Hunter's hiding place. The tension in Hunter's chest loosened just enough for him to exhale silently. His hands were clammy, slick with the nervous sweat of someone who had narrowly escaped death.

But there was no time to dwell on it. The patrol was still within earshot, and Hunter knew the countdown was ticking away. He had to finish what he'd started. He had no choice but to move quickly now. Every second was precious.

Hunter waited a beat longer, making sure the patrol was a safe distance away, before he sprang into action. His movements were swift, precise, as he crawled from his hiding place and approached the explosives. His heart pounded in his chest, but his hands were steady as he disarmed the safety on the charges.

The timer showed five seconds.

The explosion had to be perfect. There could be no mistakes.

Hunter dashed to the end of the tunnel, his footsteps silent against the earth as he found a position where he could observe the entrance. From here, he could see the faint shadows of the Germans on the road, not far off, as their patrol had moved out of view.

Three seconds. The thought was like a hammer in his mind. The explosives were set to obliterate the tunnel. They would never use it again.

The distant rumbling of the trucks faded into the background, and all that mattered now was the final moment. Hunter's lips barely moved as he muttered under his breath, "Goodbye, you bastards."

The explosion came with a thunderous roar. The ground trembled beneath him, a shockwave that rattled the air in a cacophony of metal and dust. The tunnel entrance collapsed in a fiery inferno, sending debris flying in all directions. The earth seemed to shudder as if recoiling from the destruction.

Hunter didn't wait. He was already moving, his legs

pumping in the direction of the trees, the smoke rising behind him as the night was set alight with the force of his success.

But as the adrenaline ebbed and the reality set in, Hunter knew this was only the beginning. The tunnel had been destroyed, but the Germans would come looking for answers. They would come hunting for him.

And Hunter was ready.

IV.

It was now or never.

Hunter's heart beat in his chest like a drum, the pressure of the moment pressing down on him. The mission, the danger, the lives at stake, it all blurred into the singularity of now. There was no more time to second-guess, no more room for hesitation. The German patrol had moved into position, their lanterns flickering like eerie fireflies in the dark, casting long shadows over the rugged terrain. But Hunter had waited long enough. He was about to make his move.

He burst from his cover, a flash of movement that caught the patrol completely off guard. His boots hit the dirt with purpose as his eyes locked on his targets. The MP-40 in his hands felt like an extension of himself, the cold metal reassuring in his grip.

Three shots. Quick, precise, deadly.

The first soldier dropped to the ground with a muffled thud, the silenced rifle hardly making a sound. The second was already turning, but it was too late, he didn't even have time to raise his weapon before the second shot struck him in the chest. The third soldier went down in a spray of blood, his eyes wide with surprise, his rifle slipping from his hands as he crumpled to the earth.

Hunter didn't waste a moment. The patrol was neutralized. But the officer, he was the last to fall.

The German officer's hand shot up, his face pale under the harsh light of the lantern. He fumbled for his sidearm, but Hunter was quicker, another shot ringing out. The officer's body twisted in the air before collapsing to the ground in a heap.

Hunter's breath came in short bursts, his muscles coiled with tension as he scanned the area. The silence of the forest seemed deafening after the sudden violence. The bodies of the patrol lay scattered, their lifeless forms a grim testament to the deadly efficiency of his strike.

But there was no time to celebrate.

Hunter's eyes flicked toward the tunnel entrance. The charges he'd planted were primed and ready. The German camp was on full alert now, the sound of boots pounding against the dirt carrying through the trees. Soldiers were rushing toward the tunnel, shouting orders, their voices muffled but growing louder with each passing second.

Hunter moved quickly, stepping over the fallen bodies of the patrol and toward the tunnel. His pulse quickened, the sound of the countdown ticking in his head, drowning out everything else. Ten minutes. He didn't have more than that.

He reached the tunnel entrance, crouching low, his eyes scanning for any signs of movement. His hands moved deftly, checking the wires, making sure the detonators were in place. His breath was steady, his mind sharp. It was instinct now, the rhythm of a man who had done this before. He didn't flinch, didn't hesitate.

He pulled the lever, activating the countdown.

Five minutes.

A quick glance over his shoulder revealed the German soldiers were getting closer. They were just be-

yond the tree line now, moving in tight formation toward the entrance. Hunter's gaze narrowed. They were prepared. They had come to stop him, to undo everything he had worked for. But it was too late.

Hunter turned and sprinted into the forest, his legs pumping as the sounds of the camp grew fainter. The rumble of engines filled the air now, distant but unmistakable. Reinforcements were on their way. The German response was swift, and the patrol had likely radioed for backup the moment they'd seen him. It wasn't a surprise. Hunter had anticipated it.

The forest seemed to stretch on forever, but his focus was laser-sharp. His breath came in shallow bursts, the cold night air biting at his skin, but his mind was already a step ahead, calculating, plotting his next move. There was no room for error now.

Four minutes.

The sound of engines grew louder, closer. He could hear the thrum of German vehicles moving along the narrow road in the distance. He didn't need to look behind him to know they were closing in. They would be coming in force, half-tracks, motorcycles, and possibly armoured cars. They wouldn't stop until they found him. Until they silenced him.

Hunter didn't look back. There was no point. His only chance was to keep running, to stay ahead of them just long enough for the charges to finish their job.

He reached a ridge, his eyes scanning the landscape below. He knew there was a small riverbed running through the valley. The terrain there was difficult to navigate, but it offered cover. Hunter moved toward it, his footsteps careful but quick. He was breathing heavier now, the adrenaline coursing through his veins. He could feel the weight of the explosives on his chest, the pressure building.

Three minutes.

The sound of the engines was unmistakable now. He could hear them turning onto the path that led through the trees, the gravel crunching beneath their wheels. They were almost upon him. He had no choice but to take the long route around the river. It would slow him down, but it was his only chance to lose them.

He darted into the underbrush, his eyes narrowing as he adjusted his path. He knew the Germans would be searching the area methodically. They were relentless. They would comb the entire forest if they had to.

Hunter's mind raced as he pushed forward. There was only one way to win this: outsmart them. The forest was his ally, but time was not.

Two minutes.

Hunter could hear the voices now, the Germans shouting commands as they fanned out across the terrain. It wouldn't be long before they picked up his trail. They were trained to hunt men like him, but he wasn't just any man. He was a shadow, a wraith, a ghost in the dark.

The distant rumble of their engines grew nearer, and Hunter pushed harder. His legs burned, his breath was ragged, but he had to keep moving. There was no turning back.

Suddenly, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He stopped dead in his tracks, holding his breath. A figure emerged from the trees ahead. A soldier, alone. He must have wandered off from the main group. He had a rifle slung over his shoulder, but he wasn't paying attention. His back was to Hunter.

This was the moment.

Hunter's hand shot out, and with a swift motion, he pulled the soldier's rifle from his shoulder, bringing

it to the soldier's throat in one smooth motion. The soldier didn't make a sound.

"Not a word," Hunter whispered, his breath steady. "Keep moving."

The soldier nodded, his eyes wide with fear, his hands shaking. Hunter forced him forward, leading him toward the riverbed. It was risky, but it bought him time. The patrol wouldn't know what had happened. They'd be searching in the wrong place.

One minute.

Hunter could see the lights of the approaching vehicles now, their headlights cutting through the trees like searchlights. He had to move quickly. He shoved the soldier into the brush, watching as the man scrambled into cover.

The riverbed was only a hundred yards away, but the vehicles were almost upon him. Hunter ran.

The countdown continued to tick down in his mind.

Thirty seconds.

Hunter reached the riverbed just as the first of the

German vehicles came into view. He dropped to the ground, his body pressed low, eyes focused on the moving headlights. The vehicles were on a direct course for him. They hadn't seen him, but they were getting closer. Too close.

Twenty seconds.

Hunter's fingers were numb, his heart racing. He had one shot at this.

He gripped the detonator tightly, his finger hovering over the button. The moment was now. The vehicles were almost there, the tension thick in the air.

Ten seconds.

The first vehicle came into view, its headlights blinding, the roar of the engine deafening.

Five seconds.

Hunter's thumb pressed down on the button.

The explosion shattered the night.

V.

Hunter's pulse raced as the last echo of the explosion reverberated in his chest. The earth had trembled violently beneath him, and for a split second, the world had frozen, time suspended in the chaos of smoke and dust. The tunnel was gone. The Germans' precious supply line, obliterated. But the victory came at a price. The air was thick with dust, making it hard to breathe, and the sound of his footsteps, quick but steady, was drowned out by the ringing in his ears.

He didn't stop. Not even for a second.

The mission was complete, but the real battle had just begun. There would be no easy way out. The Germans would come for him with everything they had, and Hunter knew it. They wouldn't let a British agent slip through their fingers. Not when he'd just crippled their war effort.

Hunter's mind raced as he pushed forward through the dense forest. The trees were a blur in the dark, their shadows stretching long across the ground as the moonlight fought to break through the thick canopy. He could hear the distant sound of German engines revving, the rumble of trucks and jeeps tearing through the woods toward the destruction. They were close. Too close.

The adrenaline surged through his veins, pushing him onward as his legs burned from the exertion. He couldn't afford to slow down. He'd have to make it to the extraction point, a small clearing by the river, where the boat would be waiting. The rendezvous was a gamble, but it was his only chance. He had to believe it would work. He had to.

As the sounds of the German patrols grew louder, Hunter's thoughts flashed back to the mission briefing, to the faces of those who'd died in the past days, and to the men and women who'd placed their trust in him. There was no room for failure. Not now.

The trees ahead shifted, and Hunter slowed his pace, muscles tensed. He wasn't alone anymore. He could feel their eyes on him, the weight of German soldiers closing in. He had to act fast.

A burst of gunfire snapped through the air to his left. He dropped to the ground instinctively, his body flattening against the earth as the bullets whizzed past, just inches away. His hand was on the trigger before his brain could register the danger, and he fired back, the rifle kicking in his hands. The muzzle flash illuminated the darkness in brief, violent flashes.

"Move, damn it," he muttered under his breath as he rolled sideways, narrowly dodging another round. His heart raced, but his training took over. He was a ghost, darting through the underbrush, slipping between shadows. His legs felt like lead, but he had to keep moving. They couldn't catch him. Not now.

There were at least half a dozen soldiers behind him, closing in fast. Hunter didn't have the luxury of counting them; he just kept running, zigzagging through the trees, staying low, his boots thudding softly against the soft earth. He could hear the pounding of boots as they chased him, their voices rising in frustration as they struggled to keep up.

But Hunter knew the woods. He'd trained in forests like this for years, and he knew how to lose a tail.

He made a sharp left, sprinting down a narrow

path that barely cleared the trees, and veered toward a small stream. The sound of rushing water filled his ears, drowning out the voices of the Germans behind him. It would take them longer to follow his trail now. The stream would wash away his footprints, and the thick brush would cover his scent. He was buying himself time, but not much.

A sharp crack split the air just behind him, and a bullet tore through the air, clipping his jacket. Hunter cursed under his breath, his heart pounding harder as he dived to the ground, his stomach scraping against the cold, wet soil.

They were too close. He had to make it to the river.

His muscles screamed in protest as he pushed himself up, forcing his body to obey his commands. His breath came in short, ragged gasps as he sprinted toward the clearing, praying the boat was there, praying he wouldn't have to fight his way out of this after all.

He broke through the trees and into the small clearing by the river just as a shadow loomed ahead. His heart sank, the sight of the German soldiers moving into position just at the edge of the clearing. They'd beaten him to it.

Hunter's mind raced. There was no escape, not by foot, and the boat, if it had even been there—was now too far across the water. It was a trap, and they'd sprung it.

But Hunter didn't give up. He had one card left to play.

"Think, Hunter, think!" he hissed to himself. His eyes darted around the clearing, searching for anything that might give him an edge. There was no time to waste.

And then he saw it, a pile of crates stacked neatly along the edge of the clearing. It was a small, makeshift supply dump, likely intended for the Germans' forward base. The crates were full of rations and ammunition, and Hunter knew exactly what to do with them.

He moved swiftly, crouching low as he darted toward the crates. His fingers fumbled at first, too frantic with the weight of the situation. But he found what he needed, two grenades. The pull cords were still intact, and he wasted no time.

He set them both and hurled them toward the Germans, his heart leaping in his chest as the grenades

arced through the air, their metal bodies glittering in the moonlight. There was no time to watch them land. Hunter was already moving again, racing for the edge of the river as the first explosion rang out behind him.

The blast rocked the clearing, sending splinters of wood and metal flying in every direction. The German soldiers shouted in surprise, some of them diving to the ground, while others scrambled for cover. It was chaos, exactly what Hunter needed.

He plunged into the river, the cold water shockingly deep, but he kept his head down, swimming as fast as his arms would carry him. The current was strong, but Hunter had trained in far worse conditions. His body screamed in protest, his muscles aching with fatigue, but he kept moving, swimming with purpose.

Another explosion, louder this time, echoed across the valley. The Germans were regrouping, but they were too disoriented. The blast had given him enough of a head start.

Hunter reached the opposite bank, pulling himself out of the water, his body heavy with exhaustion, but his mind focused, sharp. The boat was waiting for him on the other side of the ridge, just as he'd hoped.

He could hear the quiet hum of the engine now, the faintest sound cutting through the night. He was almost there.

But then, the unmistakable sound of a motorcycle engine roared to life behind him.

He didn't stop. He couldn't. With everything he had left, Hunter pushed forward, toward the boat, toward his escape.

The soldiers on the motorcycle were close now, their headlights illuminating the ridge ahead. There was no way he could outrun them.

Except, he wasn't trying to outrun them.

Hunter turned toward the river, dragging his body into the trees as the bike sped toward him. The motorcycle screamed down the narrow path, its rider oblivious to the trap waiting.

Hunter gritted his teeth as he pulled the final grenade from his belt. His finger pulled the cord, and without hesitation, he threw it directly into the path of the motorcycle.

The explosion was deafening, a burst of flames and metal that lit up the night sky. The motorcycle erupt-

ed into a fireball, sending the rider tumbling through the air, his body flung violently as the blast consumed him.

Hunter didn't look back as he reached the boat. He climbed aboard, his muscles on fire, his body covered in dirt and sweat. As the boat powered up, cutting through the river, he glanced once more toward the shoreline. The Germans were regrouping, but it was too late.

The mission was complete. The tunnel was gone. And Hunter had escaped.

For now.

As the boat drifted into the night, the moonlight reflected off the water like liquid silver. Hunter's mind was clear, but his heart still raced. The war was far from over. And he knew, as he disappeared into the darkness, that this was just one battle in a much larger war.

THE END

Shadows over Flanders

James O. Miller

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The bitter wind howled through the trees of the Belgian Ardennes, a sharp, biting force.

SHADOWS OVER FLANDERS

A HISTORICAL NOVEL

James O. Miller. After 23 years of high school teaching history and four years teaching in Germany retirement didn't come well especially since I hate gardening and golf. So I decided to exercise my imagination combined with my academic knowledge.

JAMES O. MILLER